

Lost Records Localities: Counties and Cities with Missing Records

Numerous Virginia localities, most of them in the eastern part of the state, have suffered tremendous losses of their early records because of intense military activity (predominantly during the Civil War), courthouse fires, and/or natural disasters. At some point, almost everyone conducting genealogical or historical research will face the problem of finding information from a county or city described as a Lost Records locality.

If you are working with a locality that has suffered a loss of court records, you must devote all your genealogical and historical knowledge and effort to the project. First, survey any extant records as well as all existing indexes found at the Library of Virginia and in the locality; second, read every surviving record page by page; third, consult the records of the surrounding localities; finally, seek out other types of records, such as church, business, private, and government documents that may help fill in gaps.

Within the colonial period, the major sources available are the patents that were recorded in the Office of the Secretary of the Colony between 1623 and 1774. Determine also if any church records are extant for the locality of your interest. A few more resources are available during the statehood period: titles to unclaimed land issued from the governor are in a record now called a grant; petitions to the legislature date from 1775 into the 1850s; tax records, both land and personal, date from 1782 into the twentieth century; and militia fines date from 1795 to 1860.

Researchers should also consult the federal census schedules that were taken every ten years. For Virginia, the censuses exist from 1810 onward, except for 1890, which was almost entirely burned. Realize, however, that most of these records are simply lists and do not give detailed family information. The records can help locate a particular name within a specific locality. With the exception of the patent and grant books, the records referenced are not available online; further, most are manuscripts and must be consulted in person at the holding depository.

As always, when researching county and city court records, first consult the list of what is available on microfilm at the Library of Virginia.

Lost Records Localities Database

This database, which is found at the following link, <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/whatwehave/local/lost/>, consists of entries for a wide variety of court records found as part of chancery and other locality records-processing projects. The entries are for surviving records from localities, most of whose records are no longer extant.

The original record is photocopied. The copies are filed together in an artificial collection—the Lost Records Localities Collection—and are readily accessed through the manuscript room at the Library of Virginia. Please check periodically as this is an ongoing project.

The Lost Records localities are divided into two categories: Catastrophic Loss and Considerable Loss. A Catastrophic Loss locality experienced a massive loss of its loose records and volumes (order books, deed books, will books, etc.). A Considerable Loss locality experienced a substantial loss of its loose records but the majority of volumes (order books, deed books, will books, etc.) continue to exist. The extant volumes are available on microfilm at the Library of Virginia.

Catastrophic Loss

Appomattox

Created in 1845. All records except land tax books were destroyed by fire on 1 February 1892.

Buchanan

Created in 1858. Records were destroyed by fire in 1885; records created after that date suffered extreme damage in a flood in 1977.

Buckingham

Created in 1761. Records were destroyed by fire in 1869.

Caroline

Created in 1728. Most loose records and deed books prior to 1836 and will books prior to 1853 were stolen, mutilated, and/or destroyed by Union troops who ransacked the courthouse in May 1864. A near-complete run of order books exists.

Charles City

Recognized in 1634 as an original shire. Records have been destroyed at various times. The most damage occurred during the Civil War when the records were strewn through the woods in a rainstorm. A few pre-Civil War volumes such as deed books, will books, minute books, and order books exist.

Dinwiddie

Created in 1752. The bulk of court records prior to 1865 were stolen, mutilated, and/or destroyed by Union troops who ransacked the courthouse during the last months of the Civil War. Post-1830 volumes such as deed books, will books, chancery order books, and marriage registers exist.

Elizabeth City

Recognized in 1634 as an original shire. Records were burned and/or destroyed during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Additional records were burned in Richmond on 3 April 1865, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War. A few pre-Civil War volumes such as deed books, will books, and order books exist.

Fairfax

Created in 1742. Original wills and deeds as well as many other loose papers were destroyed during the Civil War; deed books for twenty-six of the fifty-six years between 1763 and 1819 are missing. Numerous pre-Civil War minute books are missing as well.

Gloucester

Created in 1651. All records were destroyed by an 1820 fire, and most of the records created after 1820 were destroyed by fire in Richmond on 3 April 1865, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War.

Hanover

Created by an act of 1720 to take effect on 1 May 1721. Most county court records, particularly deeds, wills, and marriage records, were destroyed by fire in Richmond on 3 April 1865, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War. The circuit court records were not moved to Richmond and were relatively unscathed. Consequently, there is a strong run of common law papers and chancery papers after 1831 that were generated by the circuit superior court of law and chancery and its successor, the circuit court.

James City County/Williamsburg

James City County was recognized in 1634 as an original shire. Williamsburg was founded in 1699 and declared a “city Incorporate” by a royal charter in 1722, although its actual status was that of a borough. Beginning in 1770, the courts of James City County and Williamsburg shared a common courthouse. During the Civil War, the records of both localities were transferred to Richmond for safekeeping but were destroyed by fire there on 3 April 1865.

King and Queen

Created in 1691. Records were lost in courthouse fires in 1828 and 1833. Records were again destroyed by a courthouse fire set by Union troops on 10 March 1864 during the Civil War.

King William

Created by an act of 1701 to take effect on 11 April 1702. Most records were destroyed by a courthouse fire on 17 January 1885. Only a few order books and deed books exist.

Mathews

Created by an act of 1790 to take effect on 1 May 1791. Most records were burned in Richmond on 3 April 1865, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War.

Nansemond

Created as Upper Norfolk County by 1640 and renamed Nansemond in 1646. Records were destroyed in three separate fires: the earliest consumed the house of the court clerk in April 1734 (where the records were kept at that time), the second was set by British troops in 1779, and the last occurred on 7 February 1866.

New Kent

Created in 1654. Records were destroyed when John Posey set fire to the courthouse on 15 July 1787. Many records were lost when the courthouse was partially destroyed by fire during Civil War hostilities in 1862. Additional records were burned in Richmond on 3 April 1865, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War.

Nottoway

Created by an act of 1788 to take effect on 1 May 1789. Many records were destroyed or heavily mutilated in 1865 by Union troops during the Civil War. A few volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Prince George

Created by an act of 1702 to take effect on 23 April 1703. Most court records were destroyed in 1782 by British troops during the Revolutionary War and again in 1864 by Union troops during the Civil War. A few volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Prince William

Created by an act of 1730 to take effect on 1 March 1731. Many pre-Civil War records were lost, destroyed, or stolen by Union troops in 1863 during the Civil War. Sixteen deed books and five will books are missing.

Richmond County

Created in 1692. Some volumes were burned and mutilated through unknown causes; in addition, the will books prior to 1699 were missing as early as 1793, and order books for the period 1794–1816 are also missing. Numerous loose records prior to 1781 are missing as well.

Stafford

Created in 1664. Many pre-Civil War court records were lost to vandalism by Union troops during the Civil War. A few volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Warwick

Recognized as Warwick River County, one of the original shires, in 1634; the name was shortened to Warwick in 1643. County court records were destroyed at several times with most destruction occurring during the Civil War. The clerk's office was burned on 15 December 1864. County court minute books and loose records from 1787 to 1819 were destroyed by the fire. Additional records were burned in Richmond on 3 April 1865, where they had been moved for safekeeping during the Civil War.

Considerable Loss

Accomack

One of the original shires recognized in 1634, it became part of Northampton County in 1643, reverted to Accomack about 1663, merged into Northampton again in October 1670, and reverted to Accomack for a final time in November 1673. A significant number of loose records from the 1700s suffered extreme water and pest damage. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Albemarle

Created in 1744. All order books except the first and many loose papers between 1748 and 1781 were destroyed by British general Banastre Tarleton's raid on Charlottesville in 1781 during the Revolutionary War.

Bland

Created in 1861. Most loose records were destroyed by fire in 1888. All volumes and part of the chancery papers were saved.

Botetourt

Created by an act of 1769 to take effect on 13 February 1770. Many of the loose records suffered tremendous water damage as a result of a courthouse fire on 15 December 1970. Because of the near loss of records, the General Assembly passed the Virginia Public Records Act in 1975 for the purpose of preserving local records. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Brunswick

Created in 1720 (county government established in June 1732). Most loose records prior to 1781 are missing. Pre-1781 volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Craig

Created in 1851. Deed Book A and most of the loose papers were destroyed by Union troops during the Civil War. Pre-Civil War recorded deeds were rerecorded in Deed Books B and C. Volumes that record court orders and wills exist.

Culpeper

Created in 1749. A significant number of loose records are missing for the period prior to 1840. They were stolen, mutilated, and/or destroyed during the Civil War. Culpeper was the site of several military engagements and experienced widespread pillaging by both Union and Confederate troops. The county courthouse was used as a jail for Confederate prisoners by Union forces. Volumes that record deeds and wills from the formation of the county exist. Minute books for the periods 1749–1762, 1765–1797, 1812–1813, and 1817 are missing.

Greene

Created in 1838. Deed Book 1, 1838–1841, was lost during the Civil War when it was removed from the courthouse. Some court records, primarily volumes, suffered water damage as a result of a courthouse fire on 24 October 1979.

Henrico

Recognized in 1634 as an original shire. All county court records prior to 1655 and almost all prior to 1677 are missing. Many records were destroyed by British troops during the Revolutionary War. Post-Revolutionary War county court records exist. Almost all circuit superior court of law and chancery and circuit court records were destroyed by fire during the evacuation of Richmond on 3 April 1865 in the Civil War. The county's circuit court held its sessions at the state courthouse in Richmond.

Isle of Wight

Recognized as Warrosquyoake County, one of the original shires, in 1634 and given its present name in 1637. Most pre–Revolutionary War–era loose records are missing. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

King George

Created by an act of 1720 to take effect on 19 May in 1721. Most loose records prior to 1830 are missing. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Lee County

Created in 1792 to take effect on 13 May 1793. A significant number of loose records prior to 1860 including chancery and judgments are missing. They were probably destroyed when Union forces burned the courthouse in October 1863 during the Civil War. Most volumes including deed books, will books, and order books exist because a local judge removed them from the courthouse for safekeeping before the fire occurred.

Mecklenburg

Created in 1764. Numerous loose records prior to 1783 are missing. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Northumberland

Created about 1645. The county suffered some losses in a fire in the clerk's office on 25 October 1710. Volumes beginning in 1650 that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

Richmond (City)

Established in 1742; incorporated as a town, although "stiled the city of Richmond," in 1782. During the burning of Richmond on 3 April 1865 in the Civil War, Richmond Circuit Court Judge John A. Meredith led efforts to save the circuit court records found at the State Court House. They successfully removed all the papers that were necessary to pending suits and many of the order books, but all of the wills and deed books were lost. Records of the superior court and circuit superior court of law and chancery were also destroyed. Most of the pre–Civil War Hustings Court records exist.

Rockingham

Created in 1778. A courthouse fire in 1787 destroyed primarily wills and estate records. In June 1864 during the Civil War, court records (mostly volumes) were removed from the courthouse and loaded on a wagon to be taken to place of safety on or beyond the Blue Ridge. The wagon was overtaken by Union troops near Port Republic and set afire, which was put out by local citizens. Many order books, deed books, will books, and fiduciary books, however, were lost or severely damaged by the fire. The loose records that remained at the courthouse were undamaged. Pre-1865 records including deeds and wills were rerecorded following an act of assembly passed in November 1884.

Russell

Created in 1786. The first marriage register and most loose papers were lost in a fire in the clerk's office in 1872. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills (except Will Book 1) exist.

Spotsylvania

Created by an act of 1720 to take effect on 1 May 1721. Many loose county court papers prior to 1839, when the courthouse moved from Fredericksburg to Spotsylvania Courthouse, are missing. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist. The district court, superior court, and circuit court records of Spotsylvania County from 1813 to 1889 are in Fredericksburg.

Surry

Created in 1652. Deed Book 10 (1835–1838) is missing and order books for 1718–1741 and various other early volumes are fragmentary. Most pre–Revolutionary War–era loose records are missing. Courthouse fires in 1906 and 1922, however, did not result in loss of records, which were then housed in a separate clerk's office.

Washington

Created by an act of 1776, court first met on 18 January 1777. Minute books for the periods 1787–1819 and 1821–1837 and many loose papers were lost in a courthouse fire set by Union soldier James Wyatt on 15 December 1864 during the Civil War. Wyatt, who was raised in Washington County, sought revenge for what he claimed was a wrong done against him by a county court judge before the war.

Westmoreland

Created in 1653. Many loose papers were burned during both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Volumes that record deeds, court orders (except for an order book for the period 1764–1776), and wills exist.

York

Recognized in 1634 as an original shire. Most pre–Revolutionary War–era loose records are missing. Volumes that record deeds, court orders, and wills exist.

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